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ABSTRACT

The author discounts the effects of currently promoted speed reading programs as resulting in short-term effectiveness and disregarding a consideration of what constitutes good reading at any speed. He claims that the types and levels of transformations and interpretations, verbal and nonverbal, that must go into good reading are not susceptible to simple speed reading programs or formulas. He suggests that speed reading is best taught indirectly and that educators need to focus on understanding the reading process as it is integrated with the total personality, intelligence, emotions, previous education, and life experience of the reader. (CM)

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IRA - Strategies for Improving Our Concepts and Techniques in Regard to Speed Reading.

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Speed reading courses as currently promoted and packaged are generally a waste of time for teacher and student. There has not been a really new concept or set of techniques developed in the past 50 years at least. Gimmicks and machinery have been sold and used as a means of improving the techniques of speed reading; but in the vast majority of programs using pacers of various types, T-scopes, films, etc., gains are made and recorded during the course and a quick drop-off back to beginning rates are reported within a few months or a year after a student has been involved in such a course. I earnestly hope and recommend that the IRA will not waste this decade discussing this subject of speed reading with the tired old cliches such as those reported this past winter in Look magazine in a program offered by James Brown. There is nothing wrong about his set of articles for improving one's speed and comprehension in reading, but there is nothing new in it either. I see no reason to believe that his well-promoted program will be any more successful in the long run than all the others. With the world in the shape it is in now, and with the massive problems of poor readers in and out of our schools, and with the dearth of materials for certain segments of our population, not to mention pollution: air, water, and mind; speed reading is extremely inconsequential. Let this be its epitaph.

We need to consider both the concepts underlying speed reading, and then the techniques used to develop and practice and transfer. As might be expected, we have all spent much more time and energy (and space) working on techniques - the accelerated braille of Evelyn Wood, SRA pacers, the Harvard or Iowa Films, etc. - than we have on understanding and developing the concepts upon which rest the ability to read faster with comprehension. If we look at the common techniques first it may clarify for us just how limited and shallow is our conceptual resevoir.

What do films, pacers and T-scopes require of the learner and how is that related to the text and its full interpretation? The pacers of all types have one thing in common: the reader is pursued down the page of print by a shade or a light or something which obscures preceding print and reveals what is ahead at a timed rate. What does it do to the reader? It forces him to move faster so as not to get caught under the shade. With practice amny students do manage to keep up with the shade at its set speed and many even do well answering the prescribed questions. This is taken as progress in speed reading. Unless the students using such pacing devices have been taught (without machines) some of the key skills to understanding structure and content (e.g., like the study skills) he has little hope of really making any sense of the material on the pacer or film. But even if he has learned the basic study skills (in normal reading without mechanical crutches) and does apply the skills to his paced reading, why doesn't the gain last several months after the program? The same holds true for the others: films, T-scopes, they all require the reader to be less conscious of the reading act and they require that he physically move faster across lines (or down) of print. (In short, he has to learn to discard all of the careful phonics instruction, word by word grunting so rewarded in his early elementary school years.)

But there are other so-called techniques: such as finding key words, skimming and scanning material, and using the basic study skills as guided to selecting the important from the unimportant. Of course such an approach does not need machinery. It needs good instruction in the skills, learning and applying them in a wide variety of materials (in terms of length, content, purposes, etc.) Well, what do the taught skills actually require of the learner? On what concepts are they based, or do they implement?

The mechanical devices derive from the concept that relates more closely to animal behavior than to human behavior. There is an element of the S-R learning in all of

RE002 840

these. If we force readers to move more rapidly across lines of print, and we do it enough it is believed there will be some transfer when the instrument is not being used. That somehow the habit will be grooved into the nervous system. Good old S-R. Oh, how indebted we are to rats! Films and all the pacers operate on this misconception of learning and of speed reading. Speed reading is not related to eyeball movements, physically, any more than the tongue is related to the quality of cooking. Some repetitive activity and drill is obviously necessary for certain kinds of learning, but what is required in speed reading with good understanding is much more profound than eyeball movements and repetitive acts. There is simply much more to speed reading than physical acts and movements.

Reading, fast or slow, is the second most complex intellectual task of which we mortals are capable. The first is speech in a standard symbolic code. Since the language, any language, obviously deals with symbols and their referrents in the realm of experience and abstraction, we need to look there for useful techniques and understanding of the whole speed process. Most reading should not be speed reading in any event. If people are primarily reading material which can be skimmed or scanned without loss of meaning or quality of language, they probably shouldn't be reading that stuff anyway. It will do little to enlarge their informational resevoirs, and less for their intellectual nutrition.

The types and levels of transformations and interpretations, verbal and non-verbal, that must go into good reading (at any speed) are not susceptible to simple speed reading programs or formulas as those mentioned above. When a reader has an excellent - broad and deep - knowledge and understanding and experience with life and the world, in and out of print, then he can begin to think about reading some things faster. Empty barrels may go down a hill rapidly and noisily, but so what?

Outside of providing students in so-called speed reading courses with a solid base of study skills and interpretational skills, there is little that can be done to accelerate reading rates. Without the kind of literary and life background I allude to, without the vocabulary, the sense of imagery, broad knowledge of history, philosophy, literature and the like, what can the reader bring to the matter but a pair of well-lubricated orbs? People with the kind of academic and life experiential backgrounds I refer to, normally do read rapidly but deeply. They can and od bring all of their knowledge and understanding and ability to see relationships among information and ideas and concepts. They are not hung up on getting a specific fact or date from the printed material. They do not even read for the same kind of superficial purpose normally given for speed reading. They read out of love for reading and getting more knowledge; not to get the highest score on the speed test.

Reading is so much a part of their personality it is not necessary to append phony little gimmicks to make it look good. I mean it is cellular. Now if we talk only about speed reading for very specific purposes such as skimming a newspaper or a chapter in a text in order to pick up a few bits of information, alright. That's all it is. But there is a certain tone about most reading programs which suggests that those who do not read at least some things faster are not good readers or are somehow handicapped. Nonsense. Certainly I agree, and I can do it myself, that being able to apply certain key study skills which can help to spot particular kinds of information is useful. But it is not useful to everyone, irrespective of techniques or purposes, unless the reader is a total person with ideas, concepts and life and language experience of a varied nature. I read rapidly because I want to, I need to and because I have a fairly good background in several fields. I have read fairly widely and with apparenly acceptable comprehension and interpretation. Good readers operate that way, so that even when they read a good novel, or play they bring to it expectations and information and sensitivity to language usage, imagery, and a real understanding of allusions.

Most speed reading programs do not really deal with this at the conceptual level I speak about. Skills are taught and practiced; timed readings, pacers or films and whatever other gimmickry are played with. Little or nothing is done to instill the

love of language and literature into the readers, so thay they could really cope with faster reading intelligently.

I really would call for an end to specific speed reading courses, particularly the commercial ones. Call a moratorium on buying gimmick programs and materials and equipment, and let us begin to really probe into the process of reading as it really is: organic and totally integrated with the personality, intelligence, emotions, previous education and life experience of the reader. I don't see what profit it is (except financial) for this great organization to even lend credence to speed reading as a subject of serious discussion at this time. We are not even certain how it is that children learn to read normally, and we know less about why so many read so poorly. Our diagnostic instruments are crude at best (adze axes are somewhat obsolete), and our corrective reading preograms are so musch alike that it appears we must indeed invent the wheel each generation. I heartily recommend that we do not deal with speed reading again, until we have really learned what it is that the total personality of a reader, in a given society at a given time, must do in order to read our irregular language. We must also spend much more more time and energy on developing reading programs at all levels which will delve more deeply into the nature and quality of language and literature. Our programs will be successful when we can move readers from the basals ordlinguisticstrivia, or from John Updike to Lawrence Durrell.

It is true that the symbols man makes make him, so that it is much more important for us to focus attention of the quality of what he reads and the manner in which he does this as it relates to his total life and language experience. We need not divert ourselves with specific concepts of sppped reading. Speed reading, at best, is the result of all these other forces operating. It is best taught indirectly. It would be best for us to lay it to rest right here and now.